

The beginnings of Slavery in the English Colonies

The Landing of African Americans at Jamestown from a Dutch Man-of-War Ship in 1619.

This was a tragic day indeed for these 20 African Americans and millions more who would follow, to be enslaved in the English Colonies of North America and the United States over the course nearly two and one half Centuries!

This was the beginning of 247 years of combined slavery for these people and their descendants. This is a good time to emphasize that the ancestors of African Americans did not voluntarily emigrate to the English Colonies of North America or the United States. They were brought here by force

We sometimes imagine that oppressive slave laws were put quickly into full force by greedy landowners in the English Colonies of North America. The enslavement of Africans and Indians had been common in Central and South America a century before it was introduced into the English Colonies of North America.

In 1619 the first Africans were brought to Jamestown. Their status is presumed to have been indentured servitude. Over the course of a few decades the enslavement of black Africans was established, in the individual English Colonies of North American, one law at a time and one colony at a time. The clearest view I have of the "peculiar institution" of slavery is in the colony of Virginia. During the very early period of Virginia's history, black Africans and poor whites shared a similar status. Blacks and whites, men and women often worked side-by-side in the fields. Anyone who broke their servant contract was punished. In the turn of events leading to the legalized enslavement of black Africans, the fact that Africans could not speak, read, nor write English upon their arrival. Africans had no concept what an indentured servant was, let alone and indentured servant contract.

Early colonial court records in Virginia concern "Antonio the Negro," as he was named in the 1625 Virginia census. He was brought to the colony in 1621. At that time, English and Colonial law had not yet defined racial slavery; the census called Antonio a "servant."

Later, Antonio changed his name to Anthony Johnson, married an African American servant named Mary, and they had four children. Mary and Anthony became free, and he soon owned some land and cattle. He even engaged indentured servants to work for him.

In 1640 three indentured servants, one black and two white, fled from a Virginia plantation. When caught and returned to their owner, the two white servants had their indenture extended for four years. The black servant, named John Punch, was sentenced to serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural life. John Punch's status was changed from an indentured servant to a slave. It is not difficult to imagine that how rapidly it became an accepted practice to falsely accuse black indentured servants of infractions in order to keep the enslaved for life.

In 1650, Anthony was one of 400 Africans in the Virginia Colony, among a white settler population of nearly 19,000. In Virginia county Johnson where Johnson lived 20 or so African men and women were free, and 13 of this number owned their own homes. But a drastic change loomed in the near future for Africans who were brought to Virginia! In 1661, the enslavement of black Africans was legalized in Virginia.

Traditionally, Englishmen had held the belief they had the right to enslave non-Christians or captives taken in a just war. Conveniently Africans and Native American fit this definition. But what if these captives learned to speak English and converted to Christianity? Should they be released from bondage and given their freedom?

Instead the status of Africans was not determined by changing their religious faith, but by their unchangeable skin color! Also when freed black indentured servants were perceived as a threat to the property-owning white elite. The establishment government placed restrictions on available lands thus creating a general unrest among all newly freed indentured servants.

In 1676, freed working class men rebelled burned Jamestown to the ground, (Bacon's Rebellion). This made indentured servitude look less attractive to Virginia's ruling class. Also indentured servants were entitled to move on once indenture obligation was fulfilled. The replacement of indentured servants was continual and costly for plantation owners. It was expedient to enslave Black Africans for life because Africans were easily identified by their skin color. It was even extra expedience to legalize the enslavement of black children.

Ironically the first English Colony in North America to legalize the enslavement of black Africans was Massachusetts in 1641. But laws were soon passed to legalize slavery in the other English Colonies.

In 1662 Virginia legalized the enslavement of black Africans. All children born to enslaved mothers were the property of the slave mother's owner. The condition of enslavement was passed down from generation to generation. 1705 Virginia declared that "All servants imported and brought

in this County... who were not Christians in their Native Country... shall be slaves. Negroes, mulattoes and Indian shall be held to be real estate."

English suppliers responded to the increasing demand for slaves in the English Colonies in North American. In 1672, England officially entered the slave trade when the King of England chartered the Royal African Company, encouraging it to expand the British slave trade. In 1698, the English Parliament ruled that any British subject could be licensed to practice in the African slave trade.

During the first 50 years of the 18th century, the number of Africans brought to British colonies, on British ships, rose from 5,000 to 45,000 a year. England surpassed Portugal and Spain to become the largest trafficker in the African Slave Trade!

In 1700, when newly arriving slaves were being taken to the slave market at Jamestown, this is the scene they witnessed. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the sight of a hook in the body of an African sent the message in the strongest possible way. Slave owners were not joking and enslaved Africans had better take them seriously! The term "lynching" is said to have derived from Charles Lynch, a slave owner at Lynchburg, Virginia during the latter part of the 1600s and early part of the 1700s. It is reported that during that period of Colonial history, Charles Lynch and other Virginia planters were driving themselves into bankruptcy by torturing and killing so many Africans, in their attempts to force Africans to submit to slavery.